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Japanese War Orphans in Manchuria: Forgotten Victims of World War II

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Japanese war orphans left behind in Manchuria, current Northeast China, at the end of World War II are forgotten victims of the war. They are the unfortunate byproducts of the ill-conceived, grandiose immigration policy of the Japanese empire, to settle a million Japanese households in its puppet state of Manchukuo, which began in 1932. The Kwantung Army abandoned these settlers when the Soviet Army invaded Manchukuo in August 1945. The Russian soldiers and the local Chinese, whose land had been taken by the Kwantung Army, massacred the Japanese settlers; however, the Japanese government decided to leave them in Manchuria, planning to have them naturalize there either as Chinese or as Russian.

About 5,000 children who had survived the carnage were trapped in the strained postwar Sino-Japanese relationship, against the backdrop of the Cold War. They had gone through every imaginable human atrocity—incurring near fatal injuries (being shot, or stabbed by bayonets), experiencing or witnessing group rape and mass suicide of fellow settlers (including their parents), becoming displaced persons in an enemy country, losing their identities, and suffering post-traumatic depression syndrome. They grew up in China, being bullied as “little Japanese demons,” and then were persecuted as “Japanese spies” during the Cultural Revolution, being subjected to interrogations and torture (those who were executed are unaccounted for). They essentially endured what the American soldiers in Middle East and the Guantánamo Bay Prison inmates combined encountered.

China and Japan resumed their diplomatic relations in 1972, following the Sino-U.S. rapprochement. Nevertheless, the Japanese government continued to ignore the existence of the orphans until 1981, when it sponsored search missions for their kin in Japan. Moreover, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare only identified as “orphans” the children who were under thirteen years of age at the end of the war and did not know their Japanese identities. The ministry thereby excluded the minors who were thirteen years old and older from the definition of such orphans, categorized them as “adults,” and continued to ignore them. Even more strangely, the Ministry excluded from the definition of the “orphans” the children who were under thirteen years old at the end of the war, if they knew their Japanese identities. According to a Ministry official, “If a girl knew her identity, she was categorized as a ‘woman left behind in China,’ even if she was three years old.” The logic behind this definition seems to be that if children knew their Japanese identities, they did not need government help. In order for the orphans to receive the Japanese government’s assistance, then, they had to have forgotten their Japanese names.

Upon delayed repatriation four decades later in the mid-1980s, the orphans were despised as “Chinese” and discriminated against in their Japanese homeland. The problem was that their repatriation was protracted over such a long time that it became an immigration issue of the “Japanese-Chinese” to Japan. They did not speak Japanese. They did not know how to behave like Japanese. Consequently, they could not find stable jobs, lived below subsistence level, and became welfare dependents. Their Chinese

spouses and children, who accompanied their repatriation, became social delinquents in the society where even the Japanese orphans themselves were looked down on as “Chinese.”

The Japanese Diet legislated the Law Concerning Promotion of Smooth Repatriation and Assistance to Self-Sufficiency After Permanent Repatriation of the Japanese Left Behind in China and Others in 1994, five decades after the end of the war. Nevertheless, the law did little for the orphans. It did not even remove the legal barriers to their repatriation, such as the “domicile” requirement and the “receiver” requirement. The orphans needed to submit their domiciles, the equivalent to a birth certificate, to prove their Japanese identity. However, they did not know their Japanese names. They could not locate their parents’ domiciles that were kept in the local government registry offices, unless they found their kin. Yet, they could not find their kin unless they knew their Japanese names.

Furthermore, they needed a receiver (guarantor) for their repatriation to their own homeland. Yet, few wanted to become their receivers because of the financial burden involved. Most of their parents had died in Manchuria, while some of those who had been repatriated did not come forward, because of their guilt feelings for having left their children in Manchuria. Many of their other kin, such as their aunts and uncles, or elder siblings, did not come forward, either.

Being unable to make both ends meet, the repatriated orphans asked for financial support from the Japanese government, but in vain. Then, upon retirement at the age of sixty, they did not receive the full amount of the national pension, due to the lack of premium payments (because they were repatriated in their forties and fifties). They petitioned for legislation to provide a “post-retirement pension for the repatriates from China,” but failed. Rejected by both the executive and legislative branches of the government, they filed class-action lawsuits in a total of fifteen local district courts throughout Japan. It was their last resort, because they had no way to sustain a living. Nevertheless, they lost in all the cases, with the exception of one in Kōbe District Court.

Oddly enough, notwithstanding the “victory” in the judicial verdicts for the government, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō decided in 2007 to provide financial support to the repatriates from China. Prime Minister Abe was obliged to do so, because his predecessor, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō, had swiftly legislated a law to provide financial support to the five repatriates from North Korea in 2002, who were the victims of abductions by North Korean agents in 1978. The law was legislated within fifty days after their repatriation. The discrepancy between the ways in which the Japanese government dealt with the two groups of victims who lived in hostile countries during the Cold War was astounding.

The repatriation of the orphans was hailed as the “proof of peace and friendship” between China and Japan when the official search missions began in 1981. Nevertheless, the Japanese government exasperated the Chinese officials in charge of the orphans, with further delays in repatriation and insufficient assistance to their settlement. It managed to make the orphan issue a foreign policy issue between the two countries, giving China yet another excuse to complain. Meanwhile, many orphans still live in China, seeking their repatriation. These Japanese orphans are another group of victims of Japanese militarism, in addition to the Chinese and Korean “comfort women” and forced laborers. The orphan issue is an integral part of the Japanese government’s war responsibility. Japan’s

“postwar era” will not end until the repatriated orphans feel that they are finally accepted as Japanese in their homeland.

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(Mayumi Itoh’s book by this title was published earlier this year by Palgrave Macmillan.)